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ABSTRACT

This monograph examines the life of Volney B. Palmer, who was the prototype of the modern advertising person. The first section discusses his background and early experience in Pennsylvania. The second section discusses the American Newspaper Agency, established as the first advertising agency in 1842. The third section examines the kind of man Palmer was and concludes that, among his many accomplishments, he was the first advertising agent in the country; he promoted the concept of advertising to change marketing techniques; he sold a "system of advertising" instead of simply offering newspaper space for sale; and he wrote, produced and delivered advertisements to newspapers for advertising. (TS)

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DONALD R. HOLLAND

Volney B. Palmer, 1799-1864: The Nation's First Advertising Agency Man

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Contents

Introduction 1
Background and Early Experience 3
The First Agency 12
Volney B. Palmer, the Man 23
Notes 38

Introduction

THE ADVERTISING agency business has changed so little in the United States since it was started by Volney B. Palmer in 1842 that if, by some transcendental manipulation, he appeared in a Madison Avenue agency tomorrow, it might take him as long as an hour to fit into the routine of a modern agency's operations.

Except for the fact that agencies then represented publishers, rather than advertisers, the agency's business practices would seem all too familiar to him, although his first reaction might well be a raised eyebrow at the lowering of the traditional commission from the 25% of his day to the present 15%; he'd know about copy, layout and production problems; he could remind media buyers how lucky they are to have only a handful of newspapers and magazines to evaluate today in comparison to the number in his day; he'd be right at home lunching with the account executives and swapping stories about client idiosyncrasies; he would certainly have some vigorous comments to make to agency management about the problems of slow pay from clients and what to do to keep valuable employees from walking out with the agency's accounts. Admittedly, he wouldn't know anything about radio and television, but once he learned that they are simply another medium of communication, he'd pick up what he'd need to know rapidly. The more things change, as the French say, the more they stay the same.

Volney B. Palmer was surely the prototype of the modern adman. Contemporaries stated that he was genial, knowledgeable, affable, sociable, fond of telling witty stories, fashionably dressed, in short, the ideal advertising agency man of fact and fiction.

Palmer possessed a versatility that would be the envy of any dedicated adman today. He was, of course, a sophisticated and successful account man; he was, in his own words, a skilled copywriter, reminding his clients and prospects frequently that they would be better off to let him write copy for their ads, since he would make "valuable practical suggestions for improvement in force and style such as are written by unpracticed hands."

And he was a "cheerful" media buyer, providing his clients with "reliable explanatory information of places, character of circulation of papers, adaptation of various business pursuits and comparative rates of advertising cheerfully given with every reasonable facility."

Agency owner, first-class canvasser, cheerful media buyer, skilled copywriter—who else but Palmer has done it all and done it all so well? From an unpromising beginning in 1842 to owning and operating a four-office network in Philadelphia, New York, Boston and Baltimore by 1848—who else has matched that rate of growth? He started with nothing but an idea over 130 years ago, preached the doctrine of a systematic program of advertising expenditures, created the commission system that is both the bane and the support of the advertising agency, and positioned the advertising agency squarely and profitably between advertiser and publisher.

There is not a shred of advertising-for-the-sake-of-advertising in any of Palmer's writings; he was earnestly dedicated to the task of convincing skeptical businessmen that they simply had to learn to use this "new engine of commerce judiciously and effectively."

In the 134 years since he started the first advertising agency in this country, it seems doubtful if anyone—practitioner or academician—has charted a more clear and effective course for advertising than this nation's first adman, Volney B. Palmer.

Background and Early Experience

VOLNEY B. PALMER, the son of Nathan and Jerusha Palmer, was born in or near Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, in 1799.[1] Palmer's father, Nathan, was active in Wilkes-Barre public affairs from the time he arrived in the area in 1784 until the family's departure in 1818. Nathan Palmer studied law in the office of Judge Cleaveland of Canterbury, Connecticut, and was admitted to the practice of law before the Supreme Court of Connecticut in 1792.[2]

In 1794, when Judge Cleaveland closed his law office and led a band of Connecticut settlers to the Western Reserve to found the city on the Cuyahoga River that today bears a slightly modified version of his name, Nathan Palmer decided to move to Wilkes-Barre, where he was admitted to the Pennsylvania Bar in 1795. Here he raised five sons, Strange, Sterne, Volney, John and George, and one daughter, Eliza. Their politically active father held such positions in Luzerne County as Clerk of the County Commissioners, Clerk of the Orphan's Court, Prothonotary, Register of Wills and Recorder of Deeds. He was elected to the first Town Council of Wilkes-Barre and later served in the Pennsylvania Senate from 1810 to 1812. In 1812, he was appointed County Treasurer, a position he held until he and his family left Wilkes-Barre for Mount Holly, New Jersey, in 1818.[3]

Why Nathan Palmer left Wilkes-Barre, where he had earned a position of prominence and respect, is a matter of conjecture. One historian referred to his "numerous mercantile interests"[4] without being specific, and these may have been affected by the depression that had been troubling eastern Pennsylvania for the previous two years. For whatever reasons, the Palmer family made the move in 1818, when Volney was 19, to start a newspaper in that rural community. The choice of locations was a good one. This Burlington County farming center in central New Jersey had trade ties southwesterly to Philadelphia and northwesterly to Trenton in the early 1800s.

Mount Holly had no newspaper at the time, and there seemed to be no great demand for one. Two years earlier, in 1816, James McKnight and Jacob Felthausen, printers from New York state, began publication of the Mount Holly *Advertiser* but it lasted for only a few issues.[5]

The first five issues of *The Burlington Mirror* (original name of *The New Jersey Mirror*) carried in its editorial column a lengthy apology entitled, "A Prospectus for Publishing a Newspaper in Mount Holly." In it the editor, Nathan Palmer, acknowledged the failure of previous newspapers and promised to do better with his family's new venture. They would, he promised, run an honest newspaper, would not take sides in controversies and would open the paper's columns to all sides of dissenting opinions. The paper's motto: "Pledged to no party's arbitrary sway, we follow truth wher'er it leads the way."[6]

Publishing *The Burlington Mirror* was a family affair, with Nathan providing capital and editorial direction, and his sons furnishing the necessary labor. Volney Palmer's mother, Jerusha, and his sister, Eliza, both of whom were later to publish the newspaper themselves, received their training in journalism in the early days when the entire family worked together.

The newspaper was well received by the citizens of Mount Holly, and one year to the day after the first issue, it was expanded in size and changed its name to *The New Jersey Mirror and Burlington County Advertiser*.

A little more than half of *The New Jersey Mirror* consisted of advertisements typical of the period—rewards for lost horses and runaway apprentices, cures for strange-sounding maladies, whisker-growing nostrums and stage coach schedules. The remaining columns were devoted to six-week old news from Europe, clippings from other newspapers, poems, essays, local news and a somewhat bland editorial, usually on the advantage of living in the United States in general and in New Jersey in particular.

Editorials occasionally indicated that the Palmer family was intimately acquainted with the problems confronting newspaper publishers of the day: obtaining a steady supply of newsprint at reasonable prices, circulating the paper regularly to subscribers and convincing loyal subscribers to pay, preferably in advance. Running a newspaper in the early 1800s was a constant battle with

dwindling financial resources, and the Palmer family was no stranger to hard times. At several periods, subscribers in arrears were urged to pay in cash, if they could, or in hay, oats, wood, butter, cheese or other commodities.[7]

Aside from a one-year period in 1826 when he turned the operation of the paper over to his eldest son, Strange, Nathan continued as publisher until his death on July 28, 1842.[8] *The New Jersey Mirror* was left by Nathan to his widow, Jerusha,[9] who served as publisher until her own death in 1856, when the Palmer family newspaper became the responsibility of her daughter, Eliza. That Jerusha proved to be a successful publisher is apparent from the personal property inventory of her will, which showed an estate of $9,766.81, over and above the newspaper itself, a considerable sum for 1856.[10]

Around 1830, Volney Palmer and his brother, Strange, left Mount Holly for Pottsville, Pennsylvania, a new town growing rapidly due to the development of the anthracite coal fields by Philadelphia financier and speculator, Stephen Girard. Perhaps the two brothers were unhappy with their father's unexpected emergence from retirement to take over the newspaper once again; perhaps they were simply looking for a new venture beyond the confines of Mount Holly. Both had accumulated a little capital during their Mount Holly days, and both were surely aware of the boom in mine land in the area.

The economy of the entire country was healthy in the 1830s. Money was flowing freely from the state banks, credit was easier to obtain than it had been for a long time, and the states were expending large sums of money on roads, canals and other internal improvements.[11]

"Rents here are very high," the Pottsville *Miner's Journal and General Advertiser* boasted in 1830, "and a two-story building on the main street will command a rent between $200 and $300 per annum. Capitalists could not lay out their money to better advantage than by purchasing lots and building upon them."[12]

While neither Strange nor Volney Palmer were very likely the capitalists called for in *The Miner's Journal*, each did have some money and each seemed determined to join in the promised growth of Pottsville. In the April 10, 1830, issue of *The Miner's*

Journal, Strange Palmer announced that he was opening a "General Agency and Conveyancing Office in the front room of Mrs. Otto's Boarding House in Pottsville." For the next nine years, Strange Palmer was actively engaged in the real estate business, both for himself and for his clients.

His brother, Volney Palmer, was fairly active in the real estate business himself. In February, 1830, along with two partners, Edwin Swift and George Farquar, he invested $1,000 in Lot No. 10 in Pottsville; in May, 1830, he and George Farquar each put $500 into Lot No. 16, and only a few days later he bought out Farquar's share of this lot for $375; later on in May he purchased Lot No. 8 for an undisclosed sum from the town's founder, Benjamin Potts.[13]

Except for the real estate activity noted above, there is no evidence available at this time to indicate the line of business pursued by Volney Palmer in Pottsville. Earlier writers on the subject suggested, without offering any proof, that he was first an editorial writer and later advertising manager of *The Miner's Journal*. They are probably wrong on both counts.[14]

With such a substantial investment in Pottsville real estate, it seems more reasonable to believe that Volney Palmer continued in the real estate business, probably working with his brother, Strange, at least until 1839. At that time, Strange N. Palmer became publisher of the Pottsville *Emporium and General Advertiser*,[15] perhaps enlisting the aid of his brother in the venture. In 1841, Volney B. Palmer with his wife, Eliza, and family left Pottsville for Philadelphia to open a real estate office, and the 1841 issue of *M'Elroy's Philadelphia Directory* contained the following listing:

> Palmer, Volney B., real estate office, 104 S. 3d.[16]

It is difficult to imagine a more inappropriate place or a more inauspicious time to start a real estate business than Philadelphia in 1841. The entire country, but especially the East, continued in the throes of a depression triggered by the Panic of 1837, and the city of Philadelphia endured more than its share of financial troubles.

In the early 1830s, the merchants and commercial interests of eastern Pennsylvania looked north with dismay as the Erie Canal

successfully moved trade to and from the port of New York. Philadelphia faced a dual problem: loss of trade to New York City to the northeast and to Baltimore to the south, the latter drawing the trade of central Pennsylvania down the Susquehanna River.[17]

In a belated move to counter this competition, the legislature of Pennsylvania authorized the construction of "The Pennsylvania Mainline" to connect Philadelphia and Pittsburgh and open the entire state to trade with the west. This fragmented series of railroads, canals and portages was slow, costly, inefficient and in the aggregate, a dismal failure. One critic summed up his feelings for the system in a speech in the Pennsylvania legislature in which he pointed out that "The Pennsylvania Mainline" with its combination of railroads and canals "was elucidating the defects peculiar to both methods of transit with the advantages of neither."[18]

This attempt to thwart the natural advantages of the Erie Canal all but drained the state treasury for a decade. Governor David Rittenhouse Porter found the state in 1841 with a $36,000,000 debt and with no money in the treasury to pay the interest due on state bonds.[19] Effects of the Panic of 1837, which nearly brought Philadelphia to a standstill, continued to be felt in all quarters right into the 1840s. The deceptive appearance of wealth during the flush days of the Thirties, one writer observed, led to excesses both in banking and internal improvements.[20]

The Panic of 1837 was followed by some recovery in 1838, but in the next two years conditions became even worse. The subsequent depression was long and hard, and the low point in the business cycle was reached in 1843. Business stagnation in the cities created widespread unemployment, and workmen by the thousands were discharged. So tight a hold did the Panic have on the minds of many Easterners that they sought freedom and new opportunities in a fresh start on Western lands.[21] With state government on the verge of bankruptcy, unemployment a way of life, credit either impossible to get or, if available, so costly that borrowing from a bank was the last step before disaster—the year 1841 was not a good year to be in Philadelphia, let alone be there to start a real estate agency. Palmer himself provided a poignant testimonial to the times in his personal real estate transactions. In 1842 and 1843, Volney and Eliza Palmer sold the building lots in Pottsville purchased in 1830 at a loss of $300.00.[22]

It seems unlikely that a newly established real estate office in Philadelphia in 1841 was greeted with much success, so it is not surprising to note in the 1842 edition of *M'Elroy's Philadelphia Directory* that Volney B. Palmer had broadened his business interests to include a coal office:[23]

Palmer, V. B., Real Estate and Coal Office, 104 S. 3d

In addition to the above listing in the alphabetical index of the Directory, the following half-page advertisement was inserted by Palmer:

V. B. Palmer's

REAL ESTATE AND COAL OFFICE

No. 104 South Third Street
(*a* few doors below the Exchange)

Philadelphia

Agency for the Purchase and Sale of Houses and Lots, Farms, Farming, Timber and Coal Lands, Bonds and Mortgages, Ground Rents, Anthracite Coal, &c.

Immediately beneath the above paragraph the following information appeared, the first association in print between Volney B. Palmer and the advertising business:

ADVERTISEMENTS and Subscriptions received from some of the best and most widely circulated newspapers in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, and in many of the principal cities and towns throughout the United States, for which he has the agency, affording an excellent opportunity for Merchants, Mechanics, Professional Men, Hotel and Boarding House Keepers, Railroad, Insurance and Transportation Companies, and the enterprising portion of the community generally, to publish extensively abroad their respective pursuits—to learn the terms of

> subscription and advertising, and accomplish their object here without the trouble of perplexing and fruitless inquiries, the expense and labor of letter writing, the risk of making enclosures of money &c, &c.[24]

The arrangement of the copy suggests that Palmer in 1842 viewed himself as a real estate man who had a coal business and who also happened to be agent for advertising and subscriptions for a few nearby newspapers. On the other hand, the copy in the paragraph concerning advertising suggests that Palmer had given some thought to reasons why advertisers might use an agency. The few benefits he listed are hardly definitive and he expanded his list of advantages considerably in future advertisements, but those included in his first advertising effort reveal that Palmer knew how to sell and that he was aware that he would have to sell his new service vigorously.

The September 14, 1843, issue of *The New Jersey Mirror* contained an advertisement inserted by the publisher in which he announced:

> V. B. Palmer, Esq., at the Real Estate and Coal Office, No. 59 Pine Street, below Third, two squares south of the Merchant's Exchange, Philadelphia, is authorized to receive subscriptions and advertisements for The New Jersey Mirror . . . and give receipts for the same. Merchants, Mechanics and Tradesmen in general may extend their business by availing themselves of the opportunity for advertising in country papers which his agency affords.[25]

The following announcement in the January 18, 1845, issue of the Pottsville *Miner's Journal* indicated that real estate, coal and advertising were still combined even when the agency business was moving along well:

> Volney B. Palmer at his Real Estate and Coal Agency, corner of Third and Chestnut Streets, Philadelphia, No. 160 Nassau Street, New York, No. 10 State Street,

> Boston, and Southeast corner of Baltimore and Calvert Street, Baltimore, is our agent for receiving subscriptions and advertisements for The Miner's Journal.

Over-imaginative writers have described the beginning of the first advertising agency as something like Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus. From what we read in Palmer's advertisements, there was nothing sudden about it, no burst of brilliant ideas. The idea for an advertising agency was a product of Palmer's long apprenticeship in the newspaper business and the troubled times that must have been hampering his real estate and coal business. Under the pressures of making a living when a living was hard to make, Palmer slowly and tentatively began an advertising agency.

Publishers were hardly clamoring for a service they didn't really know they needed, and advertisers were not trampling each other in the coal yard at 59 Pine Street. From what we can gather, the process of developing a new service called an advertising agency was both slow and tentative.

The term "Advertising Agency" was not used by Palmer until he included it in an advertising insert in *M'Elroy's Philadelphia Directory* in 1849. At times he called himself a "newspaper agency" and at times a "business agency" and at least once a "coal agency," but until 1849 he was not running what he called an "advertising agency."

The September 9, 1842, issue of *The New Jersey Mirror* contained an advertisement by Palmer headed, "V. B. Palmer's Real Estate and Coal Office and Newspaper Agency." Here the three functions appear for the first time together in an advertisement, and, although they are set in diminishing type size, there is no doubt from the emphasis of the copy that Palmer was now serious about the advertising agency business.

Beneath the line, "Advertisements and subscriptions received for newspapers published in the following cities" was the first listing of those towns and cities in which Palmer represented a newspaper; only the names of the towns are listed, not the names of the newspapers themselves. The names and rates of the newspapers which were Palmer's principals remained a closely guarded secret from all but active clients.

No attempt was made in this advertisement to sell the *concepts* of advertising, which was to be the standard practice in future advertisements, and there was no promotion of a "System of Advertising" which was promulgated frequently in subsequent advertisements. With this advertisement, Palmer announced that he was in the agency business, that he had completed his preliminary work, that he had moved from idea to the operational stage.

The First Agency

THE AMERICAN Newspaper Agency of Volney B. Palmer, Esq., claimed to be the sole representative of 1,300 of the estimated 2,000 U.S. newspapers published in 1849. A manufacturer or retailer contemplating an advertising program walked into one of the offices Palmer maintained in Philadelphia, New York, Boston or Baltimore, looked over the list of newspapers available to him, examined specific papers from the racks of publications, indicated the particular market area that interested him, described his seasonal preference and revealed the amount of money he intended to spend.

The Palmer agency then prepared for the potential advertiser a speculative presentation, which included space rates for each newspaper and the total proposed expenditure. To compensate his agency for this work, and for the actual preparation of advertisements, the Palmer agency deducted a commission (considered to be 25% but never publicly stated) from the publisher's bill before payment.

No one had ever done anything quite like this before. Businessmen were aware of advertising, of course, but hardly in an organized, systematized way. Volney B. Palmer set out to show his clients how they might use this tool "to advertise judiciously, effectively and safely."[1]

"You have only to step into his office with the notice you wish given to the whole people of the United States, and it is done," the publisher of *The Boston Chronotype* declared in 1846.[2] The publisher of *The Baltimore Sun* testified in 1843 that "Mr. Palmer is, we believe, entitled to the credit for originating and establishing upon a general scale in this country, this new and important public convenience . . . ."[3]

How Palmer viewed his advertising agency business can be seen in the following list of advantages of advertising through the Palmer agency:[4]

ADVANTAGES OF ADVERTISING
IN THE NEWSPAPERS OF THE CITY
AND COUNTRY AT V. B. PALMER'S
ADVERTISING AGENCY

1. The most widely circulated journals in America are on file for the convenient examination and selection, and the terms for each recorded for the inspection of subscribers and advertisers.

2. The publishers have appointed and authorized him to make contracts for subscriptions and advertising. His receipts are regarded as payments, and therefore valid and sufficient.

3. Advertisements are inserted in any one paper or (from a single copy) in any number, at the lowest cash price, without extra charge, at the earliest practical time, and a copy of each paper furnished to the advertiser, that he may be sure that his order was complied with.

4. Editorial and Business Notices inserted on the most favorable terms, calling attention to advertisements.

5. Reliable explanatory information of places, character and circulation of papers, adaptation of various business pursuits and comparative rates of advertising in different papers cheerfully given with every reasonable facility, for adopting at once a safe, judicious, efficient system of advertising.

6. Advertisers save the postage and avoid the labor of correspondence with publishers, risk of remittances, unseasonable and repeated calls of strangers with separate bills, the various deceptions of journals of dubious character, and losses from contracting with incompetent and irresponsible persons.

7. To avoid unnecessary expense, concise forms of advertising are written without charge, and valuable practical suggestions made for improvement in style and force such as are written by unpracticed hands.

A briefer list of "advantages" appeared in the 1850 edition of Palmer's *Almanac* and is worth observing to note the additional points included:[5]

- he is Agent for the best papers of every section of the whole country.
- he is empowered by the proprietors to make contracts and give receipts.
- his long experience and practical knowledge qualify him to give valuable information.
- the same prices only are charged to advertisers as are exacted by his principals, the publishers.

- a selection can be made suitably adapted to the various pursuits of advertisers.

- a complete system of advertising can be adapted upon either a large or small scale.

- the papers are on file at the Agency, where advertisers can examine them, see the terms, and obtain all requisite information to enable them to advertise judiciously, effectively and safely.

The "advantages" listed above throw an entirely new light on his business, indicating that he was far more than a passive middleman. It is clear that he served the advertiser by providing counsel on media selection, that he handled the physical detail of production and billing, that he wrote, or counseled on, advertising copy, and that he did all this at no charge to the advertiser. It is also clear that he earned his commission from the publishers by seeking out and directing the advertiser to the pages of his principals' newspaper, and that he had both their confidence and their authorization to represent them in giving receipts for payment. In the light of this information, we must take a fresh look at Palmer and his agency.

One historian stated that Palmer arranged for the newspapers to bill the advertiser directly and the advertiser to pay the newspaper directly.[6] If such were the case, then what reason would Palmer have to make the point that he was empowered by the proprietors to make contracts and give receipts? One gives a receipt in exchange for money as evidence that the money was paid. Palmer clearly was taking money from the advertisers, deducting his commission, and then paying the net amount of the bill to the publisher.

The subject of writing copy for the advertisements he inserted has never been appreciated by modern writers. As early as 1842, Palmer explained the concept of his advertising agency and the copywriting function he assumed in the following advertisement:[7]

Advertising and Business Cards will be written without charge for the advertiser. This mode of advertising and distributing Business Cards throughout the country is not only the most thorough and effectual, but by far the most economical and convenient that can be adopted.

The phrase, "System of Advertising," appeared frequently in all of Palmer's writings. He urged businessmen to use advertising on a

regular basis, to use it to develop new markets, to take advantage of the flexibility of advertising to specific regions or in specific seasons. The publisher of *Parker's Journal* had this to say about Palmer's advertising system:[8]

> Go into Volney B. Palmer's office . . . and look over the letters he has received from commercial houses and then say whether or not this advertising system is productive of benefit. Mr. Palmer, as the Father of American Advertising, may well be proud of his offspring; there are thousands now in prosperous businesses who acknowledge themselves endebted to him for all their wealth; he saw the necessity of increased publicity for the interests of commerce and organized a system which can now electrify the Union into a knowledge of whatever facts he desires to be generally known. An inventor no longer has to fight his way through years of starvation and neglect; he goes to Palmer, and overnight, finds his discovery the topic of discussion in every social circle from Maine to California within a fortnight.

Palmer amplified his system of advertising:[9]

> There are two things on which we always rely for the prosperity of our system; *viz.*: first, the *conscience* to recommend as much advertising and no more than suits a man's interests; and secondly, the *knowledge and facilities* which enable us to advertise most profitably for the advertiser.

Of all the quotations which Palmer used in his promotion literature, none seems to capture the essence of his advertising agency as well as this letter from "Izzard" to "Mac," publisher of the Dayton *Transcript*, written in June, 1846:[10]

> One of my first devoirs was attention to your business with your agent, Mr. V. B. Palmer, and it will not be uninteresting to give you some detail of an hour's interview with this extraordinary man. I say extraordinary because he is not only the first who has set foot on a new system of propelling the commercial machinery of this country, but has conceived the plan . . . and by virtue of perservance and energy . . . succeeded.
>
> To give you some idea of his views: he draws a comparison between all commercial pursuits and the great theater of mankind in their physical and intellectual capacity. Whereas the physical must be aided by the intellectual . . . so the *material affairs* of business transactions must be aided and sustained by a proportionate exercise in intellectual energy. . . .
>
> Formerly, the *material* of trade required but little intellectual exertion. While our population was comparatively small . . . it was easy then to give notoriety to business abroad by verbal or written communications. The times have changed. The material of trade had advanced beyond all calculation for speed and dispatch. . . .

Everyone is now obliged . . . to aid his physical exertions in trade . . . by due recourse to those means by which his business or profession may become generally known. This is the *intellectual* part of business, and the press is the great medium through which it can be developed.

Publicity must be gained through the Press, or the business establishment, like a body without a soul, must return to the elements from which it sprang. Such are the views of Mr. Palmer, and I think them correct, and I congratulate you on having your name on his list. He is a real businessman.

Amid all the hyperbole in the writings of and about Palmer, something new and significant was in the air. Businessmen who had staggered through a series of depressions with only occasional glimpses of prosperity for a decade might be excused if they viewed the zealous Palmer with a feeling bordering on awe.

In an eight-page, pre-printed insert, the first and only to be bound into *M'Elroy's Philadelphia Directory*, Palmer cited an editorial from *The Goucester Telegraph:*[11]

There has sprung up an enterprise which would have been laughed at as impractical a dozen years ago. This originated . . . with V. B. Palmer, Esq., who is known already wherever an American newspaper finds its way.

By the middle of the 1850s Palmer was looked upon by many businessmen as a commercial messiah. A few brief testimonials published by Palmer indicate the good feelings some of Palmer's clients expressed:[12]

With Mr. Palmer, we have had a business acquaintance for the past seven or eight years, and during that time have had no occasion to find fault, except, perhaps, he sometimes has taken his jobs a little too cheap to afford himself a reasonable commission and us very fat pay for our services. He is a man of strict integrity, and the business community puts full confidence in him.

Cheshire Republican
(Keene) New Hampshire

We paid a visit to the spacious rooms of V. B. Palmer, Esq., the advertising agent, Court Street, Boston. He is agent for nearly all the newspapers in the United States; he is a gentleman of the old school, and abundantly fitted for his station. He is doing an immense business in his line, and if any Boston merchants wish advertisements inserted in our paper, they have only to call on him and have the work done at once.

Westfield News Letter

Mr. V. B. Palmer, the well-known Newspaper Agent, has been engaged in the agency for receiving advertisements and subscriptions for almost every journal in the Union . . . and one more indefatigable and intelligent . . . does not exist.

New Orleans Picayune

From an intimate acquaintance with Mr. Palmer, we are prepared to say that any business connected with the Agencies which he advertises will be both promptly and honorably transacted . . . he has reduced this business to such an admirable system that all parties can hardly fail to be satisfied.

New York Daily Tribune

Palmer was, without a doubt, a vigorous and effective apostle of change as he traveled the narrow streets of Philadelphia around the Merchant's Exchange, calling on men of commerce and urging those who were not spending money on advertising to do so at once:[13]

A capitalist who freely spends one hundred thousand dollars to build and furnish a grand hotel . . . would stare if you suggest the outlay of $5,000 in letting everybody know that such a hotel had been opened; and so he spends ten thousand dollars in rent, for servants, superintendence, &c., while waiting for his house to become known . . . which a judicious outlay of $5,000 for advertising at the outset, would have saved and transmuted into profit.

To those merchants comfortably satisfied with their existing level of trade, he delivered the following admonition:[14]

People must not only know him and his business, because otherwise they will not find *him*, but they must know him because otherwise they *will* find and trade with those who are better known. Customers, like sheep, are gregarious, and flock where they see others flocking.

To those merchants skeptical of investing in advertising, he offered both a reassurance and a challenge in impressive terms easy for them to understand:[15]

As a general rule, an advertisement in a paper now will meet the eyes of four to ten times as many persons as a like announcement would have done twenty years ago. It is easy to place one where it will meet the eyes of one hundred thousand persons within two days, or by using half a dozen papers to challenge the attention of half a million people.

Challenge the attention of half a million people—what Philadelphia manufacturer would want to do that in 1842? Why, for example, would the Philadelphia-based owner of a patent medicine

formula spend money on an advertisement for his nostrum in the *Missouri Republican* of St. Louis? It was one thing to convince a reluctant retailer to advertise locally or to sell a hotel owner on doubling his advertising budget, but what did Palmer say in response to a Philadelphia merchant's question, "Why should I advertise in St. Louis, Missouri?"

The term "Industrial Revolution"—that neat label at once both misleading and convenient—never entered his vocabulary. Palmer may have been one of those adventurers whose activities accelerated industrial and commercial development, but he was not aware at the time tht he was engaged in some sort of "Revolution." A revolution implies a sudden and dramatic upheaval in the social and economic fabric of society, but in the United States in the 1840s, no such upheaval was taking place. Men were setting the stage for it, however, whether they knew it or not. The steam engine was becoming more reliable, more efficient and more practical for transportation needs; anthracite coal was fueling its steam-generating boilers. Palmer sensed the great changes these two advances would bring to the world, and he commented:[16]

> Before railroads had annihilated space, before the Collins Line converted the Atlantic seaboard into a ferry station, before the electric telegraph rendered thought universal and coexistent, whole villages vegetated and trade was confined not to the best but to the nearest source . . . men traveled little, and each locality supplied its petty needs through one accredited channel—New Yorkers purchased in New York—Bostonians in Boston, and so on. . . . But now we have changed all this; we think by lightning and hurry forward on wings of iron and lungs of fire; newspapers give instantaneous publicity to every face of interest; we prefer to purchase the best things in the cheapest market, and an advertisement is the natural mode of acquainting the public with the result of private industry and skill.

Here, then, is the "Industrial Revolution" as seen by a man engaged in its beginning. In one paragraph, Volney Palmer suggested the expanding and increasingly efficient transportation system knitting all sections of the country together; men and goods moving freely, safely and less expensively; newspapers appealing to a new level of literacy and the broadened interests of their readers; increasing production that demanded new outlets; new levels of available income being spent on new goods and services, and advertising carrying the good news to all the country.

In the 1340s the pieces were beginning to fit together: production, distribution, market, transportation and the means of communication by way of newspapers. All had advanced to the point where Palmer was able to assemble them into a whole and call it a "System of Advertising."

By 1846, the advertising agency of Volney B. Palmer consisted of four offices in four eastern cities: Philadelphia, Northwest Corner of Third and Chestnut Streets; New York City, Tribune Building, Nassau Street; Boston, No. 6 Congress Street; Baltimore, North and Fayette Streets. Palmer maintained his residence in Philadelphia and supervised the office in that city, hiring managers for the other three offices. S. M. Pettengill recalled that the Boston office of the Palmer agency was at 20 State Street when he joined the firm in January, 1848, and occupied quarters in the back of Mr. Willey's bookstore. A clerk, J. Sargent, and Pettengill were the only two employees at that time. He stated that the office was moved to new and larger quarters in the summer of 1848, but that he and Sargent still made up the entire staff.[17]

An advertising agency that could be operated from the back room of a book store by two men must have been a simple operation with relatively low overhead. Space was required to display the newspapers represented by the agency for the perusal of advertising prospects and perhaps for some kind of conference room in which agent and client could sit down together and discuss advertising.

Pettengill was hired by Palmer as a general canvasser and clerk. His duties were to look over the local newspapers, check advertisers and try to get them to place their advertising through the Palmer agency. He also canvassed among advertising prospects for Business Cards to be inserted seasonally in 30 near-by country newspapers. These were small-space advertisements, rarely more than one column wide and one inch deep, containing only the name, address and the principal product or service offered.

Whenever Palmer visited Boston, as he did four or five times a year, Pettengill would accompany him on solicitation rounds. On their return to the office, Pettengill would have the responsibility for preparing the media and budget proposal which would be presented to a prospective client for his approval.

Pettengill described a typical business day with Palmer:[18]

> He would come into his office about 9 A.M., look over the daily newspapers for new advertisements, which I would cut out and make a list of for calling on. At about 10 o'clock we would sally out, calling on the most important advertiser first.
>
> He would march into the counting-room of the merchants, calling for the principal partner, and announce himself and hand his card, with a pleasing address and with as much assurance as if he were a customer who was about to purchase a large bill of goods.
>
> If he found the merchant busy, he would politely excuse himself and inquire when he could have the pleasure of seeing him, and if possible would make an appointment for that or the succeeding day. Shaking hands and tipping his hat gracefully he would leave. . . .
>
> If he found the party he was calling on willing to listen, he would introduce me and make a well-considered statement on the benefits of advertising in general and to the party he was addressing in particular. He would mention parties who had made fortunes by the use of judicious advertising. He would show how he (the merchant) could easily double his business and profits by a like course. He would point out the places where he should advertise, and how he should do it. He would generally enforce his words by some welltold stories, and get all parties into good humor and laughing heartily. He would end up by asking if he might be permitted to make out an estimate for the merchant's advertising.

Palmer made no charge for his estimates or for setting up the advertisement for the merchant, Pettengill recalled, and no obligation of any kind was involved so far as the merchant was concerned. Pettengill and Palmer would check off those cities or areas the merchant wanted to reach with his advertising message, and in the next day or two, Pettengill would return with the completed recommendation and a contract to be signed by the merchant.

Palmer felt that he was the sole agent for the newspapers on his list, and he insisted that they should make a statement to that effect at the head of their editorial column. *The New Jersey Mirror* and the Pottsville *Miner's Journal* did so, as did many of the other papers he represented.

As their sole and exclusive agent, Palmer charged the newspapers he represented for postage used in correspondence for and to them and for losses he incurred when an advertiser failed to pay his bill, deducting the amount from the publisher's bill before paying it. Pettengill reported that this often caused hard feelings among the publishers, but that his employer usually had his way.

Palmer felt that as the agent of the publishers, his losses were really their losses. His attitude in this instance could be justified both legally and ethically, but it proved later to be a vulnerable point for Palmer.

The Palmer agency would not pay a publisher's bill until the agency had first been paid by the advertiser.[19] Neither Palmer nor Pettengill, nor Palmer's publishers mention the amount of the agency commission. The only available source for the often-quoted figure of 25% is George R. Rowell, a late-Nineteenth Century adman:[20]

> Mr. Palmer not only demanded a commission of 25 per cent on all the advertisements he forwarded, but demanded the same allowance upon any advertisement that might be forwarded by one who had once been his customer.

Rowell recalled a comment of T.C. Evans of the Evans & Lincoln Advertising Agency in Boston that "he regretted coming into the business too late, for no longer could an advertising agent count upon the clean 25 per cent profit that had been possible in Palmer's time."[21]

There is no reference by name or company to any advertising client of his agency in any of the brochures or pamphlets published by Palmer. What may seem like a curious omission becomes plausible when Palmer's position is reconsidered. Palmer was the agent of newspaper publishers; his client was any advertiser who happened to place advertising through his agency on any given day. An advertiser might use the services of the Palmer agency one day and a competitor's agency the next. There was at this stage of agency development no list of loyal clients for whom an agent worked. What loyalty or stability that existed was between agent and publisher and not between agent and advertiser.

In the late 1850s, Palmer formed a partnership with three men who worked for him as managers of his offices: John E. Joy, J. E. Coe and W. W. Sharpe. No evidence is available to indicate the percentage of partnership owned by each man, but it seems probable that Palmer permitted each to buy increasing shares of the business gradually from earnings. The year 1858 is a likely date for the partnership, since *M'Elroy's Philadelphia Directory*

that year, for the first time, listed the agency as "V. B. Palmer & Company."

After Palmer's retirement, Joy and Coe came to control both the Philadelphia and the New York offices, but removed Palmer's name from the agency. W. W. Sharpe later became manager and then owner of the New York office and developed it under his own name into one of the best known and most respected advertising agencies in New York City at the turn of the century.

The Boston office of the Palmer agency was taken over by S. R. Niles, the man hired to replace Pettengill, and he, too, became a successful advertising agent in that city. The Baltimore office was closed between 1851 and 1855.[22] After the death of Palmer in 1864, the Philadelphia office became known as Coe, Wetherill and Smith, later changed to Coe, Wetherill & Company at the death of Smith.[23]

It was this advertising agency that Francis W. Ayer bought in October, 1877, and incorporated into his own agency, N. W. Ayer & Son, Inc., giving that agency the rightful claim to being the oldest in the United States and the only firm that can trace its history in an unbroken line directly to the agency founded by Palmer.[24]

Volney B. Palmer, the Man

JOHN MANNING, advertising manager of John Wannamaker's Department Store at the turn of the century, had this to say of Palmer:[1]

> In looking up the facts of Mr. Palmer's agency, I note that he seemed conscious of the logical weakness of the agency element of the business, and aimed from the very first to secure and perfect a system that would monopolize the entire trade, if he could get the cooperation of the publishers.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> He saw that a multiplicity of agents in the same trade, and, moreover, in a calling that required but little capital with which to start, would soon involve very great competition, with the natural result of very small profits. This is all the legacy Mr. Palmer left the business.

Palmer's strong opposition to competitive agencies probably began in 1848, when his assistant in the Boston office, S. M. Pettengill, left him and started an agency of his own.

In every issue of his *Almanacs*, Palmer warned against the fallacy of multiple agents, enlisting, on occasion, his friend and fellow-essayist, the publisher of the New York *Daily Tribune*, Horace Greeley, to support his position. Other publishers took sides with him, and he reproduced their letters in his *Almanacs* to support his claim that the ideal agency-publisher relationship was one of sole and exclusive representation:

> V. B. Palmer is the only authorized agent. . . . all other persons pretending to act in that capacity . . . are acting without authority.
>
> *Milwaukee Sentinel & Gazette*[2]

> Mr. V. B. Palmer is agent for the Union. . . . Persons wishing to advertise with us, will learn our terms and order through him. We have no other agents. . . .
>
> Sacco (Me.) *Union*[3]

> Our agent for the city of New York is Mr. V. B. Palmer. . . . A dozen different could not do half so good that this one may, if generally supported.
>
> *New York Daily Tribune*[4]

We receive an invitation almost every day from some fellow who claims to be an advertising agent. . . . We have been "wooled" on several occasions by these "sharpers" and we caution the country press against the rascals. V. B. Palmer is the only agent for the press we ever had any transactions with who pays promptly and acts honorably. We recommend him to the profession.

Albany Knickerbocker[5]

"Rogues and pretenders." "A swindler and a dupe." "More of the cheating sort." Such acrimony spills out from bold-face headlines in page after page of a promotion pamphlet Palmer published in 1855. His anger at competitive agencies seems to have become a compulsion by 1855, and one is curious to know what his loyal publishers and clients must have thought of his protestations. They, after all, were in competitive businesses and subject to similar pressures, and yet they did not publish pamphlets with the following printed on the cover, complete with a cut of a pointing finger:[6]

To prevent Imposition, the public have been repeatedly cautioned against the acts of imitators and pretended agents, who infest some of our cities.

An Editorial Convention of the publishers of all newspapers in New Jersey met in November, 1846, and one of the items on the agenda was the question of single or multiple agents. The publishers resolved that:[7]

It is inexpedient for us to acknowledge more than one agent in each of the cities of New York and Philadelphia for our several papers.

And whereas, Mr. V. B. Palmer of Philadelphia, has established agencies in all the larger cities, at a considerable sacrifice of time and money, and whereas we have the utmost confidence in Mr. Palmer, therefore,

Resolved: that we recommend him as the proper person to act as agent.

The publishers amplified their resolution by pointing out that a newspaper that adds more than one agent competes with itself, a view that would generally be ignored by other newspaper publishers until the 1860s when they solved the problem by appointing Special Agents to represent their separate newspapers.

That Volney Palmer wanted to keep the advertising business to himself is understandable. Palmer created the business, its terms, its methods, it techniques. Now others were moving in and reaping the benefits he had worked so hard to sow. His refusal to accept

the inevitability of competition in a business so easy to enter, and his inability to admit that others might add new and improved methods to his own, however, did much to discredit him among publishers and competitors.

One of the important advantages advertising provided the newspaper press, Volney Palmer explained in a pamphlet written in 1855, was that of:[8]

> extending the influence and increasing the efficiency of . . . the PUBLIC PRESS, releasing it from pecuniary dependence upon cliques and monopolies, insuring to it that the free expression of opinion which it only nominally enjoys while deriving its main support from an opinional constituency. . . .

Here was an idea surely new to the business community: the revenue from increased advertising maintains freedom of the press by providing an alternate source of income, aside from subscriptions, to publishers. In addition to acquainting businessmen with his advertising agency, Palmer also promoted the concept of systematic advertising and supported freedom of the newspaper press.

Each issue of *V. B. Palmer's Business-Men's Almanac* for 1849, 1850 and 1851 contained an essay of approximately 3,500 words on the subject of the press system in the United States, two entitled, "The Newspaper Press," and one "The American Press."

Palmer's advertising pamphlet contained these comments on press freedom:[9]

> While the press is free as now, tyranny and oppression can never overcome our national manhood. . . . And yet, few newspapers in the country can live and become strong without devoting a portion of their columns to advertisements.
>
> The rate of newspapers is so low . . . that the mere subscription price, without some other aid, will not sustain them. The oldest, most permanent and most influential papers in the country are those that are enabled, by yielding a portion of their columns to advertising, to put a quota of their income from that source onto the paper itself for its improvement—devoting that expense to it which its mere subscription price will not justify. . . .
>
> If then, the newspaper is so indispensable as a guardian of our liberty . . . how valuable is any mode by which it obtains strength and permanency. How important a duty it becomes to sustain it. How few think that in the communication they make through the advertising columns of a newspaper . . . is the higher one of strengthening the newspaper of their choice, of

giving it a wider circulation and more power in its efforts of spreading with more certainty and efficiency into the family circle. . . .

In the essay entitled "The Newspaper Press" in his *Almanac* for 1849, Palmer reviewed the condition of the press in the middle of the Nineteenth Century, citing criticisms ranging from those of George Washington to Horace Greeley. (Greeley referred to the press as "satanic.")

Palmer denounced as a form of communism a proposal placed before Congress in 1848 that would have permitted all newspapers and magazines to have the use of the mail post-free. Such a system, Palmer wrote, would be unfair, for the pious Quaker would then pay for the dissemination of Catholicism and the diligent family man for the spreading of vice and corruption. Palmer's essay made it plain that he viewed advertising, not government support through postal subsidy, as the way to make the press free.

Palmer considered himself a teacher. He pointed out to businessmen that subscribers of newspapers have a wide variety of interests and reminded them that wise advertisers selected newspaper and audience carefully to obtain the most effective advertising. He also warned that merely advertising to attract the attention of potential customers is not enough; the knowledgeable businessman must remember that he kept the customers he obtained initially through advertising only by the good conduct of his business.

At another point in his essay, Palmer reminded his readers that the press in the United States is fortunate in not being harassed by government as it is in other countries, England in particular:[10]

The New York, Boston, Philadelphia or Baltimore publisher buys his paper untaxed and unstamped; he issues 1,000 advertisements in his daily sheet, paying no duty; but the Englishman, for every insertion of the same 1,000 must pay the government $365.

The taxes levied in the United Kingdom on newspapers exceeds $6,000,000: and while we are educating the frugal or the humble by furnishing 600,000 sheets daily at one cent, Queen Victoria's aristocracy keeps the millions in ignorance by taxing the smallest sheet nearly three cents.

For the next several paragraphs in his essay, Palmer rivaled Thomas Paine in his indignation over the Stamp Act, and attribu-

ted much of the ignorance of the British masses to this method of raising revenue at the expense of a free press. (The word "we" appeared in nearly every reference Palmer made to the press system; without a doubt, he considered himself and his advertising agency an integral part of the American press system.)

The role of the newspaper press as an educator of the masses appeared repeatedly in all of Palmer's writings. His close association of himself and his work with the press, and his obvious knowledge of the mechanics of journalism revealed in these essays, does much to substantiate the circumstantial evidence offered earlier that Palmer spent much of his working life around newspapers.

Further on in his essay, Palmer favored a bill passed by the legislatures of several states requiring county clerks to subscribe to and bind the newspapers printed in their respective counties. Admitting that the biggest hurdle to overcome would be getting the county clerks to do their duty, Palmer added this forecast:[11]

> **Newspapers are the common repository of events of general interest, and contribute abundant material for the history of politics, religious feelings, education, customs and manners of the people, among whom they circulate. . . .**
>
> **Files of the *Placer Times*, issued at the city of Sacramento, and the *Alta California*, put forth at San Francisco in 1849, will be rich curiosities, if filed, for the use of antiquarians of 1950.**

In a lengthy essay in his 1850 *Almanac*, Palmer traced the brief history of the newspaper from the early colonial hand-press to the steam presses turning out thousands of copies of the New York *Daily Tribune* or the Philadelphia *Public Ledger* hourly. He reminded his readers of the great income pouring into the federal treasury from the postage paid by thousands of newspapers and magazines.

As in previous essays, Palmer challenged the tax on paper in both England and France, but this time from the viewpoint that such a tax, carrying with it the obligation to submit every issue to official scrutiny, inhibited the writers and editors of English and French newspapers. He regretted that both countries could not be exposed to the advantages of the one and two-cent newspapers

which had been introduced in the United States by Benjamin Day in 1833.

Palmer also observed that the newspapers of 1850 were better printed, that higher quality newsprint was used, that delivery was faster and that news coverage was considerably improved over a few years previously. All of these much needed and much praised improvements cost money, he observed, and he returned to the function of advertising in furnishing this money:[12]

> An expense is incurred, which in former ages would have been supposed impossible for the proprietor to realize, but which yields good profit through the powers of combination and cheapness. The advertising of a public journal known to be well established and generally read, amounts to a large sum yearly, and when the receipts from that source . . . are added up, the aggregate product enables its intelligent and enterprising owners to increase their general usefulness.

Palmer overlooked few opportunities to give advertising credit for maintaining a free and viable press, but in the essay cited above he may have gone a bit too far. He ignored the many advantages of large-scale printing made possible by the "magnificent steam presses" referred to earlier and to the widening audience for the newspaper. Advertising revenue was increasing, of course, but circulation and the income from that source was increasing as well; and publishers were effecting economies from the mass production of newspapers that contributed substantially to their profits.

Palmer's essay in the *Almanac* for 1851 opened with a comparison of English, French and German styles in journalism contrasted with the American:[13]

> The American is more a journalist, that is, a writer who seizes upon the events of the day . . . flinging on them the most condensed and lively light. He does not seek to make elaborate essays; his ambitions lie not in fine writing; he spends no long hours in polishing the turns of his periods. . . . [He has] too large a round of affairs to understand and write about to cultivate with assiduity the mere perfumeries and pigeon wings of his profession.

Only three copies of *V. B. Palmer's Businessmen's Almanac* are known to exist (the issues of 1849, 1850 and 1851), although others may have been published before or after these dates.

The *Almanacs* measure 5 by 7 inches and are 60 pages in length; the cover carries a sub-title, "A Work for Everybody," which is somewhat misleading, since the *Almanacs* were published for busi-

nessmen and sold to them at 12½ cents each or one dozen for $1.00. The almanac portion of the book, prepared by free-lance writers hired by Palmer, contained much information edited specifically for businessmen; for example, tariffs, money and exchange, the coal trade, railroads, immigration, post-office regulations, the iron trade, population statistics, weights and measures, routes and distances and 37 rules of conduct for businessmen. The latter were more revealing of Palmer than they were useful, consisting as they did of warnings and admonitions concerning punctuality, a firm handshake, a ready story and a close regard for the time of both customer and salesman. In addition, Palmer's *Almanacs* contained the conventional almanac data: monthly calendar, time of sunrise and sunset, tide tables and phases of the moon.

The final six or eight pages, as well as the second and third covers, were devoted to the advantages of advertising and in particular the Palmer agency, which "embraces most of the best Commercial, Political, Religious, Literary, Scientific, Congressional, Legislative, Reformatory and Agricultural Journals . . . for which he is the duly appointed agent, and specifically authorized by the proprietors to receive and receipt Subscriptions and Advertising." In each issue, Palmer continued to stress his theme that through his agency "a regular, safe and systematic means is afforded the business community of giving notoriety abroad to their respective callings and pursuits."[14]

Each available issue of the *Almanacs* contained two major essays of approximately 3,500 words, one by Palmer and the other by Horace Greeley. Two of Greeley's essays were entitled, "Reform in Trade," and the third "A Philosophy of Advertising," for which the author won first prize in an essay contest sponsored by Palmer in *S. B. Palmer's Register* in 1849. Greeley matched the zealous Palmer in enthusiasm for advertising's potential to change the methods of trade.

The *Almanacs* must have cost Palmer a considerable sum to print and distribute, even though he apparently produced them himself and offered them for sale at a nominal price. In general, they were well-produced, professionally designed publications that must have made a favorable impression on the business community for their author.

Another publication was *V. B. Palmer's Newspaper Subscription and Advertising Agency*, a shirt-pocket size condensation of the promotional material in the *Almanacs*, measuring 2¾ by 4¼ inches and containing 66 pages. Unlike the *Almanacs*, it contained no practical information of immediate use to businessmen, unless the following quotation which appears at the top of the cover might possibly be considered in that category: "He which soweth sparingly shall reap also sparingly; and he which soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully." Although Palmer obviously meant St. Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians to serve as an admonition to those businessmen who neglected advertising, his readers might have been somewhat dismayed to read beyond Corinthians, Chapter 9, Verses 6 to 8: "Let each one give according as he is determined in his heart, not grudgingly or from compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound in you, so that always having ample means, you may abound in every good work."

The small pages printed in agate type contained advice to businessmen, aphorisms, testimonials from satisfied clients and publishers, warnings against competitors and some promotional copy on the advantages of advertising. A few examples will serve to give the tone:

> Little things should not be despised. Many threads will bind an elephant. Many drops make a river.
>
> Intense mental activity, steadily directed to some leading pursuit, is the source of all distinction.
>
> The fewest words that will convey an advertiser's ideas are the right ones.
>
> When men try to get more good than comes from well-doing, they always get less.
>
> Never put too much confidence in a man who does not look you frankly in the face when he converses with you. We always distrust men who perpetually look and act as if they were ashamed of themselves.

This pamphlet also contained the complete listing of those areas or states in which Palmer represented a newspaper. The *Almanacs* could justify their existence on the useful information they contained. However their size is difficult to file; the type size and style makes reading by middle-aged eyes all but impossible; the tone is quarrelsome and boasting.[15]

V. B. Palmer's Register was a monthly newspaper published by Palmer as "a model family paper." It was to be distributed both to the newspapers of the country and to the general public at the "unheard of price of 25 cents a year." Since the single copy price was to be a little more than two cents, and since two-cent newspapers were quite common at the time, the price hardly warranted the "unheard of" claim. Palmer explained the intent of the Register in one of his *Almanacs*:[16]

> Families that wish a cheap paper which serves up monthly the cream of the whole newspaper press, can find nothing cheaper than *this* sheet at 25 cents a year. It is also interesting to advertisers as being a regular visitor to nearly every editorial *sanctum* in the Union.
>
> To anyone who wishes to say a word in the ear of the Universal Press, here is just the speaking trumpet ready by which it may be done. And especially businessmen . . . will find this paper a source of practical and available information.
>
> It is intended always to expend upon it such editorial force, for the purpose of condensing and concentrating valuable information, as to make it worth to anyone far more than its subscription price, both as a facility for business and as an educator in the family.

No copy of the *Register* could be found. The tone of the quotation above is tentative, and no further mention of the *Register* appears in any of the *Almanacs* with one exception: the source of the announcement that Horace Greeley had won an essay contest for his "A Philosophy of Advertising," is given as *V. B. Palmer's Register*.

The preface to the 1851 edition of the *Almanac* reveals not only Palmer's opinion of advertising but something about the man himself:[17]

> Advertising is the indispensable and efficient means of securing a liberal share of custom in any department of Trade or Manufacture . . . for anyone who has commodities to sell to neglect appraising consumers of the fact through the cheapest, readiest and most penetrating medium, is to lock up his goods and refuse to exhibit them to customers.

This is typical Palmer prose. There is no doubt, no hesitation, no question of judgment. He spoke directly in the language of the businessman to any and all businessmen. Throughout his advertisements and promotion brochures, Palmer set a straightforward, self-assured tone. He will perform a certain function or he will not

perform it; letters will be post-paid; publishers will imprint his agency's name over their editorial columns; he will not be responsible for the uncollected debts of defaulting advertisers. Palmer was a man of strong opinions who would not permit himself to be pushed around by publishers or advertisers, a trait that would sometimes be interpreted as arrogance and irascibility.

The paternal feeling Palmer directed toward the advertising business is clearly revealed in the following passage reprinted inside the front cover of one of his promotion brochures:[18]

> For the last eleven years we have been making a plan and perfecting it. . . . Our facilities for doing all that we profess . . . lie in the number and the character of the papers which have confided to us the exclusive agency. . . . We take the pride of the inventor of it, and do that from strong paternal feelings. . . . Although not so great a man in our own estimation as Fourier, the Frenchman, we do not see why we should not try to leave our mark upon the industrial progress of our native country.

Of those who have written about Volney Palmer, the man closest to him was S. M. Pettengill. He described his former employer as follows:[19]

> . . . a short, thick-set gentleman of good address, genial and pleasant in manner, and had a good command of language, full of wise saws and modern instances. He was a capital story-teller, wore gold spectacles and carried a gold-headed cane, and was a first-class canvasser. He had more self-possession and assurance than any man I ever knew.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> He would sometimes meet with men who said they believed the benefits of advertising were all a humbug, and that the money spent for it was thrown away. He would then ask such men if they ever tried it, and . . . if the reply was yes . . . he then told the old story of the Indian who heard that sleeping on feathers made a bed softer and more comfortable, and tried it by buying a handful of feathers and putting them on a smooth rock, lay down on them but he "didn't rest any better but was covered with the blank things in the morning"—that feathers were "no good"—"they are a white man's humbug."

A later advertising agent attempted a description of his subject as follows:[20]

> . . . his stout figure, florid countenance, gray hair, bald head, blue coat with brass buttons, gold-bowed spectacles, gold-headed cane and bandanna handkerchief were known, and to some extent, respected by advertisers and publishers for a considerable term of years.

Rowell's reference to the "gold spectacles" and "gold-headed cane" leads to the belief that he relied on Pettengill's "Reminiscences" and his own rather vivid imagination for this description of Palmer. Others who described Palmer presented a word picture closer to that of Pettengill than Rowell. The publisher of the Dayton *Gazette*, a principal of Palmer's, had this to say about his new agent:[21]

> We found Mr. Palmer not the gross, surly uncommunicative individual some agents who have your money in their hands are, but quite the contrary, a fat, jolly, hearty old fellow of about 45 [he was 54; perhaps the figures were transposed in printing] who enjoys a joke and is, withal, quite a wit in his way.

Palmer must have taken an ironic delight in including the following quotation from the publisher of the Keene, N.H., *Cheshire Republican* in his *Almanac*:[22]

> . . . he sometimes has taken his jobs a little too cheap to afford himself a reasonable commission and us very fat pay for our services . . . but he has put many a penny into the pockets of other country publishers that never otherwise would have got there.

Only one photograph of Palmer is known to exist, and it has been reproduced in Hower's history of the N. W. Ayer Agency. The full-page halftone shows a heavy-set man of middle years posed pensively in a chair reading a copy of the *Evening Bulletin*. He is fashionably dressed, wears spectacles, and his thick, graying hair is brushed neatly to one side. His heavy, square chin rests on his clenched left hand, and one finger of that hand is laid against his left cheek.

The nose is prominent, the eyes dark and receding, the eyebrows heavy and gray. The mouth is turned down but suggests the slight beginning of a smile. The likeness is of a well-established, mature businessman of the 1850s.[23]

There is no available evidence today to determine whether or not Palmer attended college, but his writings reveal a man at home among the classics. In the first 30 pages of his pamphlet, *V. B. Palmer's American Newspaper Subscription and Advertising Agency*, he either quotes directly or refers in some way to Horace, St. Paul, Carnot, Frederick the Great, Napoleon, Archimedes, Bacon, Walpole, Hogarth, Newton, Galileo, Cromwell and Dr.

Samuel Johnson. The famed politicians, philosophers and scientists are used by Palmer to illustrate a point about advertising or the press rather than merely serving a decorative function. The impression is clear that Palmer knew these men and was familiar with their contributions to man's progress. The following paragraph illustrates his use of a figure of history and provides, at the same time, some insight into his personal philosophy:[24]

> In certain circles . . . it is fashionable to deride those principles of progress which lie at the root of every great modern proposition. It is much easier to say "Pooh!" than to examine a subject earnestly; a sneer is the lowest form of wit, but the readiest; and a man with a satirical turn of language and a slight smattering of the subject, can gain more reputation by an assault, than would be conceded to Bacon, were he to live again and undertake the defence. There are antediluvians in the present age, as well as four thousand years ago; men who will not see the impending torrent which is destined to destroy the old world, and build up a new one on a sounder principle.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> The longer I live, the more I am certain that the great difference between men . . . is energy, invincible determination, an honest purpose once fixed, and then death or victory. That quality will do anything that can be done in the world; and no talents, no circumstances, no opportunity, will make a two-legged creature a man without it.

Later in the same pamphlet, Palmer offered this comment, which also reveals something about the man's writing style and his approach to life:[25]

> Passions act as wind to propel our vessel, and our reason is the pilot that steers her. Without the wind we could not move, without the pilot we should be lost.

As a writer, Palmer possessed the ability to shift freely from straight exposition to an amusing and well-constructed soliloquy by a perplexed and jealous businessman:[26]

> There's Tewksbury; he's been off again—down to Newport with his wife, two children and a servant! Where under heaven he gets money to spend in this way, is more than I can tell. Look at him now—lives out of town, keeps a horse, drives in and out every day. His expenses must be large—yet he seems to pay as he goes. I hope there's nothing wrong about Tewksbury. Then look at the money he spends on advertising! Why that is enough to ruin any man, I don't care how rich he is. . . .
>
> Wouldn't I look well taking my wife down to Newport and staying there eight weeks?—eight weeks, indeed! I sent her on a cheap excursion—but I

couldn't go myself. I can't afford it—don't take in enough money to do it. And then to see a man spend his money just to let people see his name in the papers and sending cards and bills about the country. Tewksbury bleeds freely for his vanity, I must confess!

The Sybaritic Tewksbury, Palmer reassured his readers, was not absconding with the firms' funds but was advertising extensively through the Palmer agency, and increasing his sales and profits by doing so.

Palmer's Final Days

There is an air of mystery surrounding the final days of Volney B. Palmer. An article in the advertising journal, *Fame*, stated that Palmer became violently insane and that Horace Greeley hired a man to take care of him.[27]

There is no available evidence to support this statement, and none has been produced since to back it up. Circumstantial evidence, however, presents several arguments against it. While Horace Greeley was a friend of Palmer and was known as a generous and thoughtful man who might well have rendered such a service if it were needed, there is no reason to believe he ever had need to perform such a charitable act.

Unfortunately, the story has received wide circulation by various writers, some of whom choose to view Palmer's insanity as either divine retribution or the natural end of an advertising agency man.

Palmer retired from active participation in the advertising agency business in the latter part of 1862 or early 1863. His final listing in *M'Elroy's Philadelphia Directory* appeared in the 1863 edition: "Palmer, Volney B., 1323 Franklin, Gentleman." On July 29, 1864, Volney B. Palmer, Esq., founder of the first advertising agency in the United States, died at his home, 1443 N. 13th St., in Philadelphia, at the age of 65.[28]

Summary and Conclusions

Palmer from the first assumed that his primary task was selling the *concept* of advertising. In all his writings, he stressed the importance of advertising first and the services of the Palmer agency second. Service both to publisher and advertiser was the distinguishing mark of the Palmer agency. He made it as easy as

possible for an advertiser to come into his office, examine newspapers, plan a campaign around a budget and have all the accounting and bookkeeping details handled efficiently. For his principals, the publishers, he was a vigorous sales force that showed them a source of revenue they hadn't known existed.

No advertising historian had yet noticed that Palmer was a copy writer, that he understood the power of the written word to convey an idea, a mood, a suggestion. He considered himself skilled as a writer of advertising and offered either to write copy himself or edit the copy of "those unpracticed in the techniques." From the evidence, it seems that the role of Volney B. Palmer was considerably broader than any writer has heretofore indicated and his contributions to advertising and to the agency business greater than previously suspected. To summarize his many accomplishments:

- He was the first advertising agent in this country.
- He promoted the concept of advertising to change marketing techniques.
- He sold a "System of Advertising" instead of simply offering newspaper space for sale.
- He wrote, produced and delivered advertisements to newspapers for advertisers.

Palmer was the agent of the newspaper publishers and so stated frequently. He provided many services for advertisers, but his loyalty was directed to those publishers who paid him a commission for his services.

The actual functions of the Palmer agency--assisting with budget planning, evaluating and selecting media, preparing advertisements, writing advertising copy, delivering, checking and billing--are the fundamental functions of the advertising agency of today.

Taken as a whole, the Palmer's chief contribution was the acceleration of the concept of *systematic* advertising. Advertising, of course, existed before he set up business, and it would be folly to suggest that advertising and the early agents triggered the "Industrial Revolution" in the United States. It is, however, reasonable to suggest that Palmer and other early agents served as a sort of catalyst in the Nineteenth Century marketplace. Through their efforts, merchants, manufacturers and businessmen of all kinds were made more aware of the changes taking place in the

NOTES

Background and Early Experience

1. Palmer's birthdate can be inferred from his obituaries in the Philadelphia *Evening Bulletin*, July 30, 1864, and *The New Jersey Mirror*, August 13, 1864, in which his age at his death, July 29, 1864, is given as 65.

2. *The Gleaner* (Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania), August 4, 1842, cited in "Obituary of Nathan Palmer," *The New Jersey Mirror*, September 15, 1842.

3. Jewell O. Harvey and Ernest G. Smith, *A History of Wilkes-Barre*, Vol. III (Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania: The Raedner Company, 1927).

4. *Ibid.*, p. 1,765.

5. Clarence S. Brigham, *Additions and Corrections to the History and Bibliography of American Newspapers: 1690-1820* (Worcester, Massachusetts: American Antiquarian Society, 1961), p. 18.

6. *The Burlington Mirror*, Vol. 1, Mount Holly, New Jersey, September 16, 1818. Portions of the first issue and complete copies of subsequent issues are available in the Research Library, The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. All other issues, except the first five, are more readily available in the Main Library, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey.

7. *The Burlington Mirror*, 1818-1819, and *The New Jersey Mirror*, 1819-1930.

8. *The New Jersey Mirror*, 1826-1827.

9. Prerogative will of Nathan Palmer, Register of Wills, State Capitol, Trenton, New Jersey.

10. Will of Jerusha Palmer, Archives Room, New Jersey State Library, Trenton, New Jersey.

11. Gilbert C. Fite and Jim E. Reese, *An Economic History of the United States* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965), p. 164.

12. A. A. Nestor, "The Schuylkill Canal," *Publications of the Historical Society of Schuylkill County*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (May 1912), p. 21.

13. Grantor-Grantee real estate transactions, Register of Deeds, Schuylkill County Court House, Pottsville, Pennsylvania.

14. F. Allen Burt, *American Advertising Agencies* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1940), p. 244. The Pottsville *Miner's Journal* was not a journal for miners but a four-page weekly newspaper edited by Benjamin Bannan. Bannan gave every indication that he ran a one-man business, editing, canvassing for advertisements and very likely doing much of the printing himself. There was clearly no room for an "editorial writer" or an "advertising solicitor" in such a "do-it-yourself" newspaper as Bannan published.

15. Joseph H. Zerby, *History of Pottsville and Schuylkill County Pennsylvania* (Pottsville, Pennsylvania: 1911), Vol. V, p. 1,957.

16. P. 205.

17. Wayland F. Dunaway, *A History of Pennsylvania* (New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1950), p. 594.

18. J. R. Tyson, "Letters on the Resources and Commerce of Philadelphia," cited by A. V. Bishop, *The State Works of Pennsylvania* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1907), p. 14.

19. Dunaway, *op. cit.*, p. 391.

20. Reginald C. McGrane, *The Panic of 1837* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1924), p. 42.

21. Fite and Reese, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

22. Grantor-Grantee Real Estate Transactions, Register of Deeds, Schuylkill County Court House, Pottsville, Pennsylvania.

23. P. 203.

24. *Ibid.*, P. 1.

25. The directions given in this advertisement are incorrect. The reference here is to Palmer's original office at 104 South Third Street, which was closed at the time this advertisement was inserted in the family newspaper.

The First Agency

1. Volney B. Palmer, *V. B. Palmer's American Newspaper Subscription and Advertising Agency* (New York: 1855), p. 17.

2. *V. B. Palmer's Business-Men's Almanac* (New York: 1849), p. 61.

3. *Ibid.*, P. 61.

4. *Loc. cit.*

5. *Almanac*, 1850.

6. Frank Presbrey, *The History and Development of Advertising* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc., 1929), p. 262.

7. *The New Jersey Mirror*, September 1, 1842.

8. *V. B. Palmer's American Newspaper Subscription and Advertising Agency* (1855), p. 35.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 40-42.

11. V. B. Palmer's Advertising Agency," *M'Elroy's Philadelphia Directory* (1855), p. 8 of Palmer insert.

12. *Supra*, Note 8, pp. 45-47.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 61.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

17. S. M. Pettengill, "Reminiscences of the Advertising Business," *Printers' Ink*, December 24, 1890, p. 686.

18. *Loc. cit.*

19. *Ibid.*, p. 687.

20. George P. Rowell, *Forty Years an Advertising Agent* (New York: Printers' Ink Publishing Co., 1906), p. 72.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 109.

22. In all of his promotion pamphlets through 1851, Palmer listed four offices; but in a pamphlet published in 1855, *V. B. Palmer's Newspaper*

Advertising Agency, he omitted the Baltimore office and listed only New York, Philadelphia and Boston.

23. Rowell, *op. cit.*, pp. 72-4.

24. Ralph M. Hower, *The History of an Advertising Agency* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1949), p. 41.

Volney B. Palmer, The Man

1. John Manning, writing in *Fame*, an advertising publication edited by Artemas Ward, cited by Earnest Elmo Calkins and Ralph Holden, *Modern Advertising* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1912), p. 16.

2. *V. B. Palmer's Business-Men's Almanac* (New York: 1849), p. 62.

3. *Loc. cit.*

4. *Loc. cit.*

5. *V. B. Palmer's American Newspaper Subscription and Advertising Agency* (1855), p. 55.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

7. *V. B. Palmer's Business-Men's Almanac* (New York: 1850), p. 63.

8. *Supra*, Note 5, p. 16.

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 24-5.

10. *Supra*, Note 2, p. 64.

11. *Loc. cit.*

12. *Almanac* (1850), p. 55.

13. *Almanac* (1851), p. 55.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 78.

15. Only two copies are extant: one is in The Library Company of Philadelphia, a private library founded by Benjamin Franklin; the other is in the British Museum, London.

16. *Almanac* (1850), p. 50.

17. *Almanac* (1851), p. 41.

18. *Supra*, Note 5, p. 1.

19. S. M. Pettengill, "Reminiscences of the Advertising Business," *Printers' Ink*, December 24, 1890, p. 687.

20. George P. Rowell, *Forty Years an Advertising Agent* (New York: Printers' Ink Publishing Co., 1906), pp. 72-3.

21. *Almanac* (1851); p. 44.

22. *Almanac* (1850), p. 45.

23. Ralph M. Hower, *The History of an Advertising Agency* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; Harvard University Press, 1949), p. 14.

24. *V. B. Palmer's American Newspaper Subscription and Advertising Agency* (1855), p. 23.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 59.

27. John Manning, *Fame, Supra*, Note 1, p. 18.

28. *The New Jersey Mirror*, August 13, 1864, and the Philadelphia *Evening Bulletin*, July 30, 1864.

marketing structure and were led, perhaps even pushed, into raising their sights beyond their immediate market. The advertising agents of the mid-Nineteenth Century were an accelerator force that quickened the pace of industrial change, generating results far beyond their immediate goals or their wildest flights of imagination.